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ABSTRACT

The study reported here deals with the problem of determining what testing device can best indicate a foreign student's readiness for satisfactory performance at the college level, especially in courses requiring a good command of reading and writing skills in English. The study considers several standard proficiency tests and devises a formula that compares the relationship of performance results on those tests with students' performance in college courses. Details of the study methodology as well as of comparison results are provided along with conclusions concerning the suitability of particular tests. (VM)

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English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement among Students of English as a Second Language at the College Level

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Faculty in the Portland State University Center for English as a Second Language have indicated some dissatisfaction with available measures of English language mastery appropriate for their students. The results of the Burgess and Marks (1968) study showing no significant correlation between grade point average and scores on the Lado Test of Aural Comprehension tended to reinforce those feelings. They have been concerned specifically with the need for a test that will indicate mastery beyond the first stage of oral English proficiency and general reading skills to a level of mastery that will indicate the students' readiness for satisfactory performance at the college level, especially in courses requiring a good command of reading and writing of English. Since several different tests have been consistently used in the PSU foreign student program, it was decided to seek first a formal evaluation of present tests. Such a study would not only give a preliminary evaluation of the tests, but would also have value in pointing to new areas that need to be further investigated in connection with the problem of evaluating proficiency.

Purpose

This study was designed to obtain information on the degree of relationship existing among student scores on various proficiency tests of English designed for use with foreign students and students' performance in college courses.

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Method

Data were available in the files of the Center on some of the foreign students for several different tests. The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, Form B, (Upshur et. al., 1965) was used at the beginning and end of the first term of English 110 (the Intensive Course in English as a Second Language.) Scores were available for many students on the Lado Test of Aural Comprehension (Lado, 1957.) In addition, scores were available for some students on the TOEFL, the Test of English as a Foreign Language of the Educational Testing Service (ETS, 1970.)

A laboratory oral grade and a written examination grade were available for each student in the English 110 course.

From the students' transcripts were obtained three different, but overlapping grade point averages to be used as measures of academic achievement. The first measure was the "Total GPA" obtained using grades and credits for all courses taken in which grades were earned and weighting the grades A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0. The second measure was obtained in the same way except that grades in Eng. 110 were excluded from the computation of the GPA--and was labelled "GPA w/o English 110." The third measure of academic achievement was the GPA computed as before, but excluding all courses thought to permit adequate performance without a good mastery of English. For this "weighted GPA" all courses in art, music, physical education, and mathematics were excluded as were also the grades in English 110.

Data on all of these measures were obtainable on 17 students taking English 110, the Intensive Course in English as a Second Language, during Fall, 1966. GPA's were based on all courses taken at Portland State University through Summer, 1970. In most cases this included only work during the 1966-67

academic year.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics on this group appear in Table 1. (Below)

Table 1

Summary Statistics on 1966-67 Foreign Students
(N=17)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lab oral grade	50.12	6.61
Written exam grade	3.35	.71
Michigan English Test #1	57.70	11.09
Michigan English Test #2	67.41	12.04
Lado	65.35	14.18
TOEFL	472.58	63.17
Weighted GPA	1.96	1.34
GPA w/o Eng. 110	2.27	1.39
Total GPA	2.99	.72

Perhaps the most interesting features in the statistics are those on the three overlapping GPA measures.

First, the range of differences in GPA's as indicated by the standard deviations, was very large. Apparently the differences in level of performances among these foreign students was much greater than that of native students for which the standard deviation is usually about .50 in this University.

A second feature of interest is the relatively high mean GPA of 2.99 which

is well above the average for beginning students as a whole. The reduction in the GPA resulting from the elimination of English 110 grades, and the further reduction when grades in art, music, physical education and mathematics are eliminated brings their performance level down to that of beginning students in general. Apparently these foreign students are much more successful in earning grades in courses placing less emphasis on language, or in courses especially designed for them.

The correlations between all of the measures for this group of students are reported in Table 2. (Below)

Table 2

Intercorrelations between Variables
(N=17)

	Writing Grade	Mich Eng 1	Mich Eng 2	Lado	TOEFL	Wtd GPA	GPA w/o Eng 110	Cum GPA
Lab Oral Rating	.14	.55	.43	.59	.66	.22	.12	.24
Writing Grade		.37	.59	.34	.66	.66	.70	.62
Michigan Eng Test 1			.73	.78	.71	.35	.13	.07
Michigan Eng Test 2				.78	.81	.66	.51	.49
Lado Aural Test					.71	.57	.33	.30
TOEFL Score						.56	.48	.53
Weighted GPA							.91	.83
GPA w/o Eng 110								.91

$r \geq .48$ is significant at .05 level

Several conclusions about the tests can be drawn from the relationships revealed by these correlations.

First, the criterion measures--the three GPA's were highly related as would be expected since they were based on almost the same basic data. The high correlations do raise the question of the utility of computing special GPA's as opposed to the use of a total GPA (often already computed by the Registrar.) In general the pattern of the correlations of the other measures with the GPA's was similar regardless of the GPA used. On the other hand the correlations with the other measures tended to be lower with "total GPA" than with the two other GPA's, and the highest correlations tended to be with the "weighted GPA." Apparently the tests do a better job of predicting grades in "verbal" courses, and this effectiveness tends to be obscured when grades from the less verbal courses and English as a Second Language are included.

A second conclusion was that there tended to be a high relationship among the three published tests involved in the study, with all the correlations above .70. Whatever each of these tests is measuring, some 50% or more of what it measures it has in common with the other tests.

Only one of the tests, the Educational Testing Services' Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was significantly correlated with all of the other variables with correlation coefficients ranging from .48 to .81. If this kind of result were to hold up in studies involving larger numbers of students this test would appear to be one of the best choices for use in admissions decisions involving foreign students.

The results with the Michigan Test were a little confusing. Results from

the first administration, done before school began were significantly related only to the English 110 lab oral rating (and to the other published tests.) On the second administration (at the end of the first term) scores were significantly related to all other measures except the lab oral rating. The Michigan Test given at the end of the first term was one of the best predictors of the weighted GPA, and was as good as the TOEFL for the other GPA measures. The puzzling thing is why the first administration did not show more predictive efficiency than it did. At this point several hypotheses could be suggested. Statistics based on so small a group tend to be very unstable; so the results may simply be due to such random variations. A second possibility is that such effects have been produced in some way by the nature of the instruction during the term, perhaps involving instruction about the taking of tests. A third possibility is that variations in the circumstances surrounding the administration of the tests may be affecting the results. For example the obvious formality of TOEFL procedures and the classroom testing for the second Michigan Test in contrast with the less formal, small group administration in the Counseling Center may lead to different reactions by the students. Further study should be made to determine the reasons for these results.

The Lado Test of Aural Comprehension was significantly related to the lab oral rating, to the other tests, and to the weighted GPA, but not to the cumulative GPA, or to the GPA without English 110 grades. Results with the total GPA tend to agree with previous results from the Burgess and Marks study (1968.) The correlation with the lab oral rating was expected, but it was not expected that this correlation would be less than that for TOEFL or so nearly the same as that for the Michigan

Test which is completely a written test. In short, the Lado test did not seem to predict other scholastic performance consistently or with greater accuracy than did the other measures. Apparently each of these three tests measures different skills which may vary in importance relative to the state and level of the foreign student.

The best predictor of the foreign student's performance as indicated by GPA measures was his writing grade in the English 110 course.

Weighted GPA was best predicted by either the English 110 writing grade or the score on the second administration of the Michigan Test. Total cumulative GPA was also best predicted by the writing grade. It was also related to scores on the second Michigan Test and TOEFL. This latter combination applies also to the GPA minus English 110 grades.

In summary, the data suggest a difference in the effectiveness of predictors before and after an intensive course in English as a second language. Before such a course the most useful measure of those studied would appear to be the TOEFL. After completion of such an intensive course the best predictor of performance in other college work has been the writing grade in the English course itself, followed closely by the score on the Michigan Test given at the end of the first term in English 110. Any GPA would appear to make a reasonable criterion measure, but relationships tended to be sharpened and clarified by use of grades in courses that involve more English proficiency in the performance required of students (as in the "weighted GPA.") Judging from the data in this study and others the writers feel that the Lado test has been less helpful than others in the prediction of academic achievement.

Next questions to consider would include the reasons for the variability in

results on the Michigan Test from the beginning to the end of the course, as well as verification of these results on a larger group of students.

Implications for ESL Programs

The results of this study suggest the great importance of proficiency in the reading and writing of English to successful performance of college work by foreign students. The development of such skills should be given a high priority. Oral ability in English which may be important at the beginning of ESL instruction does not appear to be very important at the advanced level in predicting academic achievement.

In this connection it is suggested that further study be made of graduate and undergraduate scholastic performance in relation to level of English language proficiencies. Results from a study as limited as this one in terms of sample size and involvement of a single institution cannot be very definitive or generalizable. However, as mentioned earlier this study can serve as a pointer to areas of further research of language proficiency.

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